

The Agriculture, Fish and Water Process

Background

The Governor's Statewide Salmon Recovery Strategy calls for the development of conservation practice standards for use by farmers to provide appropriate levels of resource protection. This is part of the state's effort to restore the habitat functions needed by salmon to meet recovery goals under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA). The basis of these practice standards is the Field Office Technical Guides (FOTGs) developed by the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS).

In March 1998 Washington State entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with NRCS, National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and US Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) to update the FOTGs, to comply with the ESA. It is also hoped that the revised FOTGs will meet the Clean Water Act (CWA) standards as well, giving farmers certainty on both issues.

This MOU was the vehicle used to negotiate the Riparian Forest Buffer Standards currently used for the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program. The

process, however, did not include agriculture producers or representation from the environmental community. The Agriculture, Fish and Water process expands the negotiations to include these groups.

The state departments of Agriculture, Fish and Wildlife, and Ecology, as well as the Washington Conservation Commission and staff from the Governor's Office, have begun meeting with representatives from the agricultural community, federal agencies, local government, interested legislators, environmental groups, and Tribes to discuss their possible involvement in a collaborative process, called Agriculture, Fish and Water (AFW). This is a negotiated process aimed at voluntary compliance.

Besides those listed above, other federal agencies involved in the AFW process include the Farm Service Agency and the Bureau of Reclamation.

The AFW process will involve negotiating changes to existing FOTGs and the development of guidelines for Irrigation Districts to be used to enhance, restore, and protect habitat for

endangered fish and wildlife species, and address state water quality needs. The negotiated agreement must assure the long-term economic viability of agriculture in Washington State.

How the process will work

The state is proposing two concurrent processes. The first would include revising the FOTGs, involving the agriculture community and state and federal agencies, Tribes and the environmental community. Issues covered by this process would water quality and fish habitat issues such as bank stability and riparian zones. These new or revised FOTGs would then be used to develop farm plans that provide regulatory certainty when implemented.

Failure to complete the FOTG update will likely result in the process defaulting to the original signatories of the MOU. These agencies would then independently update the conservation practices.

The second component to this process includes the irrigation districts working with those parties listed to develop guidelines that will address water use and conservation, and

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water quality requirements. These new guidelines would be used by irrigation districts to prepare Comprehensive Irrigation District Management Plans. Areas not included in this process would consist of individual surface water appropriators, groundwater users that have hydraulic continuity, and Columbia/Snake River irrigators.

The state and federal agencies are working with key stakeholders trying to define what is on the table and open to negotiation and developing general ground rules and specific process rules. An agricultural caucus has been formed and is currently defining how they want to be involved in the process and choosing which organizations they want to represent them. The Tribes and environmental organizations are still discussing how they want to participate in the AFW process.

The state has invited Washington State University to participate in the science aspect of this process. They are setting up inter-disciplinary teams to work with technical experts from the caucuses on specific issues. The process will also have a large educational component, to include site visits to provide opportunities for everyone involved to see firsthand what's happening "on the ground."

What the AFW process means to participating stakeholders

The revised FOTGs will be used to develop individual farm

plans to include all practices a farm needs to achieve compliance with the Endangered Species Act, Clean Water Act, and state laws and rules such as the Water Resources Act, Hydraulic Code and Shorelines Management Act. Once agricultural producers implement a farm plan, they will receive a certificate of participation from NRCS. Farm plans will be tracked and monitored by conservation districts and the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

The development of Comprehensive Irrigation District Management Plans will be voluntary and incentive based. The main goal of this "programmatic approach" is to address potential changes in district operations to comply with ESA and CWA and, as in the case of the revised FOTGs, provide regulatory protection. The approach will support cost share programs and grants and loans, including drought preparedness and conservation funds. Flexibility will be provided in how irrigation districts meet commitments. State and federal governments will provide technical and financial assistance.

Commitment to success

The state's natural resource agencies, with the Governor's full support, are committed to the success of the AFW process. From the state's perspective, the negotiated agreement must provide agricultural-related constituents a coordinated,

efficient, streamlined "one stop shop" opportunity to address ESA and CWA requirements.

It will take the cooperative partnerships of local, state, and federal agencies, Tribes, agricultural groups and organizations, and other key stakeholders to achieve these goals. Local, state, and federal government programs will provide regulatory and technical support to these efforts, but the bulk of the work to conserve, protect and restore watersheds will be done by the local landowners themselves.

For More Information

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